

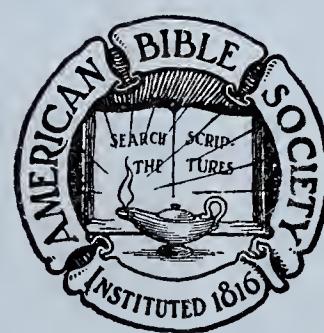
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Eighty-four Years

OF

Bible Society Work

1816-1900



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EIGHTY-FOUR YEARS OF BIBLE SOCIETY WORK.

1816--1900.

BY EDWARD W. GILMAN, D.D.

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IT is a good thing to have an object in view. The American Bible Society has one; very simple, very definite, very easily understood. Its aim for eighty-four years has been "to encourage a wider distribution of the Holy Scriptures." Starting with the postulate that the Bible is a book of such intrinsic worth that it ought to be found everywhere, it devotes all its energies to promote that result. When famine prevails in a country, the thing of prime importance is to send cargoes of corn and potatoes—details of grinding and baking may be attended to when the raw supply is at hand. So if the book is to

be used for private devotion, for individual instruction, for public enlightenment, for the furtherance of the Kingdom, the thing first needing attention is an ample supply of the inspired volume, making it easy to be procured in every community, by every family, in every school; so that whoever will, be he rich or poor, wise or simple, may have access to the Old and New Testament in “the tongue wherein he was born.”

LIMITATIONS.

The aim of the Society is still more exactly defined. So far as the English language is concerned its work is limited to “the version in common use,” and its issues of the Scriptures in every language are to be “without note or comment.”

Its founders avoided, and wisely avoided, the task of amending and improving the authorized version. They found a book which had been devoutly read in the homes of English-speaking people for more than two centuries, and had remained unaltered amid all changes of civil government, of ecclesiastical polity and practice, and of doctrinal

belief ; and that book they undertook to circulate. While perhaps no one claimed that it was absolutely perfect, it was accepted by all denominations, and against its distribution no valid objection could be raised. At the famous Hampton Court conference in 1604, the Bishop of London said : “If every man’s humor should be followed, there would be no end of translating.” And so from 1611 until now, one generation after another has tried its hand in revising, amending, improving the work of King James’ translators : now in the way of abridgment, now of rearrangement, now to better the phraseology, and now to change the rendering ; sometimes under the inspiration of denominational zeal, and again in the interest of exact scholarship. Archaisms have been pointed out ; errors of translation detected ; the underlying text is proven to be inexact and faulty ; it appears that the translators—profoundly learned men in their day—did not appreciate all the niceties of Greek grammar or understand the genius of Hebrew poetry. Hundreds of men since their day, wise and

unwise, conspicuous and obscure, have attempted to correct their errors, or substitute better versions of the Bible or of separate books of the Bible, and the end is not yet. No one can look with indifference on such efforts. Individual members of the Bible Society have been forward to promote so desirable an end. The Company of American Revisers held all their meetings, from 1871 onward, at the Bible House, and six of the most faithful and eminent of their number were members of the Bible Society's Committee on Versions. But the Society itself has had other and engrossing work to do, and the failure thus far of every attempt to attain the high ideal of a perfect English version is a vindication of the practical wisdom which incorporated in the constitution in 1816 the provision that "the only copies in the English language to be circulated by the Society shall be of the version in common use."

WITHOUT NOTES.

No less important was the restriction which forbade the Society to accompany its editions of the Scrip-

tures with notes and comments. A book like the Bible is sure to find commentators without number. It had been so before the year 1816, when the names of Scott, Matthew Henry, and Adam Clarke were familiar household words. There has been no lack since that date. The mention of such names as Barnes, Bush, Alexander, Jacobus, Lange, the Speaker's Commentary, the Butler Bible Work, assures us that of making commentaries there is no end. The notes of the Genevan divines—"most profitable annotations upon all the hard places," as they were called in 1560—retained a measure of popularity for a hundred years, but they did not then, and would not now, meet with universal acceptance, and it was King James' dislike of them that led him to direct that the new version which he was consenting to inaugurate should be free from note or comment. But parents, teachers, pastors, scholars, editors, are all the time doing their best to bring out the real significance of this wonderful book; with different interpretations, it may be; from antagonistic points of view; with

novel expositions ; with all the help of modern scholarship ; with new light from the study of manuscripts and monuments ; with better understanding of what the original Scriptures meant to those who first received them ; and with larger appreciation of the book, as designed not for one race or one century, but for every man and for all time. Wherever the book goes, in whatever tongue it is printed, helps will be wanted in the way of concordances, glossaries, dictionaries, commentaries, for the better understanding of that which is obscure and the practical enforcement of that which is plain ; and such helps will be provided as often as the demand arises. The editor of the *Congregationalist* writes “Bible Studies” for his paper, and forthwith they are translated into Hindustani, then printed in a newspaper at Bareilly, and reproduced in book form at Lucknow. But from such work the Bible Society stands aloof, not casting a shadow of censure on any effort to make the dark things plain, not attempting to discriminate between the opposing doctrines which men may deduce from

the same inspired chapter ; but holding firmly to the position that while there may be doubtful interpretations set forth by different schools, and different theories as to the way the Scriptures are to be used, it will not for a moment be questioned that all Protestant denominations, at least, will agree in circulating that English text of phrase and diction which is so imbedded in English literature and life, which has had so much to do in molding the character of Anglo-Saxon people from the days of Tyndale and Coverdale, and which has held its place so tenaciously since 1611. So the aim of the Society has been not to interpret, but to circulate ; not to explain, but to distribute ; to provide the Scriptures—and the Scriptures alone—in the largest variety and at the lowest prices, leaving it to other agencies to unfold the meaning and to apply the truth for the building up of character, the reformation of life, the promulgation of doctrine, and the establishment of righteousness in the earth.

There were at the outset some persons who would have been more

ready to lend their countenance to the Society had it been willing to include in its issues Prayer Books and metrical versions of the Psalms. In the early English Bibles these aids to worship were usually bound within the same covers as the Holy Scriptures. But the principle according to which the preparation of explanatory notes was relegated to other agencies easily determined this question as well, and cleared the way for one single, definite aim : *the wider circulation of the Holy Scriptures, without note or comment, throughout our land and throughout the world.*

COMMENDATIONS.

It would be superfluous to quote in this connection any testimony to the importance of this object from those whose antecedents assure us of their prompt assent and hearty co-operation ; but for some who would depreciate the importance of the Society's work, it is opportune to hold up to view the sentiments of representative men who are not generally regarded as supporters of the cause.

Said Professor Huxley to Dr. Northrup, in reply to the question, "What is your opinion about the value of the Bible in education?" "I hold to the Bible as a great educator. It is an unquestioned fact that for the last three centuries this book has been woven into all that is best and noblest in English literature and history."

In literature; and so Hall Caine acknowledges his indebtedness to the Book of books: "Whatever strong situations I have in my tales are not of my creation, but are taken from the Bible." Now it is the prodigal son, now Esau and Jacob, now Saul and Samuel, and now David and Uriah.

Matthew Arnold recognizes the convincing power of detached phrases: "It is astonishing how a Bible sentence clinches and sums up an argument."

We hail it also as a sign of the times when a prelate so eminent in his communion as Cardinal Gibbons takes a position at variance with the universal practice of his denomination and pronounces a discourse in his cathedral church at Baltimore in

which with argument and illustration he enforces "the sacred duty of hearing and devoutly reading the word of God." Nor can we forget the pastoral letter promulgated by the third Plenary Council held in Baltimore in 1884, in which bishops and archbishops declare "that the most highly valued treasure of every family library, and that most frequently and lovingly made use of, should be the Holy Scriptures."

Two hundred and fifty years ago a famous assembly of divines at Westminster formulated a truth in a sentence which we do well to remember: "The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man;" and herein we find reason for pressing on with this work of distribution.

THE SOCIETY'S WORK.

Starting with this aim, consider what has been the work of the American Bible Society, and in what direction its results are to be seen.

At its organization in 1816 it had before it what seemed an ample field in providing for the wants of our

own land, though its founders, even at that day, when foreign mission work was in its infancy, declared their purpose to make the influence of the Society felt in other lands, whether Christian, Mohammedan, or pagan. They chose the word "American," as they said, "to indicate, not the restriction of their labor, but the source of its emanation." So long as the colonists were subject to Great Britain all their supplies of Scriptures were imported, and not until 1782 was the first English Bible printed on this side of the ocean—a small 18mo book, in producing which the publisher lost the sum of £3,000 in specie—a book so rare that a copy has been sold in modern days for \$650. From 1790 onward many editions were brought out by publishers in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Trenton, Worcester, and elsewhere; which, however, were inadequate for the wants of our growing republic, comprising in 1816 eighteen States, with a population of eight millions. The founders might have felt appalled had they anticipated such results as the doubling of the area

of the country in eighty years; the acquisition of immense regions like Texas, California, and Alaska; a more than eightfold increase of population; a vast influx of foreign immigrants; and the addition of twenty-seven States to the eighteen then on the roll—this area to be traversed by men sent out to circulate the Holy Scriptures; these families, whether in crowded towns, or in remote hamlets, or in mountain solitudes, to have the word of life offered to them; these communities to be supplied with the one book from which in church assemblies, in Sunday schools, in neighborhood prayer meetings, and in private houses, they might certainly learn of truth and duty.

The receipts of the Society during its first year were \$37,779, and its issues 6,410 volumes; in the year ending March 31, 1900, the receipts were \$248,904, and its issues exceeded one and a quarter millions; its total issues in eighty-four years being more than sixty-seven million volumes.

Such results as are tabulated in the Annual Reports of the Society are due to a variety of causes,

among which may be mentioned the large co-operation of philanthropists throughout the land, especially as organized in auxiliary societies for the maintenance of county depositories of Bibles and the supply of local needs ; the munificent bequests of noble-minded men and women who loved the Kingdom of God, and sought to promote its welfare after their lives on earth were ended ; the hosts of people desirous to enroll their names and the names of their children as members for life of an organization so directly related to the well-being of the country and of mankind, and the words of approbation and benediction spoken by ecclesiastical bodies of every name.

ITS METHODS.

With a single object in view, the methods of work pursued have been as flexible as the varying conditions of life have required.

It has been a cardinal principle to get the Scriptures into the hands of the people at as low a price as possible. So, while securing the best possible workmanship and material, the books have been sold at uniform

prices throughout the land and without regard to profit, all societies being allowed and encouraged to buy the Scriptures at cost, and provision being made for the supply in exceptional cases at prices far below the cost. "A wider circulation," not increased returns, has been the aim. So by grants in aid, by concessions in price, by allowance of credit, local societies by the thousand have been encouraged to keep on sale in small quantities supplies of books, where heads of families, pastors, teachers, and others could obtain what they needed for their own uses or to give away.

Special consideration has been given to various classes of men. Provision has been made for the blind by books in embossed type, to be read by finger-tips alone. For American Indians, as a temporary provision, the Scriptures have been printed in Dakota, Cherokee, Mus-kokee, and other tongues, that the sons of the forest might not fail of the life to come through ignorance of the language which must sooner or later take the place of aboriginal dialects. For families of

immigrants special editions have been printed, containing in parallel columns French, German, Italian, and other languages with the English, that they might more easily acquire a knowledge of the speech of their foster land, and become the sooner identified with the people of this great republic. For the army and the navy; for seamen on lakes, rivers, and oceans; for hospitals, asylums, penitentiaries, and charitable institutions; for immigrants at their ports of landing on the Atlantic or the Pacific coast; for freedmen coming out of bondage and darkness into a new world of citizenship and of literature; for missionary work throughout the land; considerate regard has always been had, first, by providing the Scriptures in the most needed varieties and at the lowest price; and second, by generous grants in such amounts as the resources of the Society have enabled it to make.

Furthermore, under the conviction that extraordinary means are needed to search out the destitute and ignorant who know nothing of the Bible and have no means of finding and obtaining the Scriptures,

the Society, with the efficient aid of its auxiliaries and friends in all the States and Territories, has again and again carried out the colossal undertaking of canvassing the entire country, with the aim of visiting every family, especially the most forlorn and the most bigoted, and offering to supply parents and children with the Scriptures at the lowest price, and with the understanding that no family which desires the Bible shall be left unprovided because of inability to pay for it. Of course, considering sectarian prejudices and infidel hatred, it was not to be expected that the Bible, even under these circumstances, would make its way into all habitations; but it is gratifying to note, as the result of two of these costly and protracted efforts, that the entire number of families reported to be visited was 11,764,416, and that out of 1,299,150 of these which were found destitute of the Bible, 850,061 were supplied by sale or gift, and 598,924 persons besides.

These widely extended explorations have been followed by an offer to supply Sunday school scholars

with Bibles of their own at special rates, and probably 500,000 have thus become owners of the book since 1891.

FOREIGN LANDS.

The work of the American Bible Society has also extended to other lands. It has circulated the Holy Scriptures in at least one hundred of the different forms of speech which our race has inherited from the men who projected the tower on the plain of Shinar. It has its agents in twelve capital cities. Missionaries of every name are found among its co-workers. In different parts of the foreign field it has its hundreds of faithful men employed at its expense and under the direction of its agents and correspondents as distributors of the Bible. More than one half of its annual issues go into the hands of pagan, Mohammedan, or nominally Christian people outside of the United States. In one year not less than 447,858 were sold in China alone, and more than seven and a quarter million volumes in the various dialects of that empire have been printed during the last fifty years.

RESULTS.

But as for ultimate results, what mind but that of omniscience can trace them? What pen can record them? While duty is ours, results are from God, who giveth the increase.

After weeks of drought a copious rain comes down to fill the rills and streams and saturate the parched soil. Men speak of it as worth millions of dollars in reviving the verdure of forest and field, in quenching the thirst of man and beast, in starting the wheels of industry, in averting disaster and death—all this wrought by drops of water falling upon the earth and passing out of view.

So the Scriptures go forth to men with their benediction, and the whole human family is blessed. Men learn what they ought to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of them. Morality, religion, faith, hope, love, alms-giving, philanthropy, patriotism, revive and flourish, and God in Christ has praise from human lips. Vice, crime, hatred, idolatry, profanity,

wantonness, drunkenness are done away, giving place to noble thoughts and self-sacrifice for the common good. God's book enlightens the heart, and through the truth which it reveals, men are regenerated and made heirs of heaven.

The rain is of little avail without the sun ; and rain and sun together will not secure a harvest unless seed be sown ; and all together are useless unless there be certain constituents of fertility in the soil ; and so in the providence of God many things must "work together ;" but he honors his own book by giving it special power, and those who have access to it become wise.

The Society has poured out the water on the thirsty ground ; has held forth the word of life ; has proclaimed the gospel of Christ.

ILLUSTRATIONS.

These general statements might be confirmed by many specific cases. Let us adduce some evidence of the blessing brought to mankind through the circulation of the Bible. Dr. Farnsworth, of Cesarea, in the *Missionary Herald*

(March, 1896), describes the condition of churches in the Orient sixty years ago: "The missionaries found in Turkey a number of churches, such as the Greek, the Armenian, the Jacobite, the Coptic, and others, claiming to be Christian and to take the word of God as their sure foundation. But that word, whatever it might have been to them in ages past, had ceased to be a fountain of instruction; had, in fact, become to the common people nothing more nor less than a fetish. It did not exist in the vernacular of any portion of the people. It was, indeed, read in their churches, but not understood. The reading was a form which it was supposed might have some mysterious influence. The book was held up for the worshiper to kiss as he passed out of the church. So far from being in common use was it that it was considered a sin for an unordained man to take it into his hands. The first work of the missionary was to translate the sacred Scriptures into the vernacular of the several different nationalities. This has been accomplished. The

greatness and importance of this work can hardly be overestimated. It may be remembered that this land is not far from Babel. The word is now found in some twenty-seven different languages and characters, including even Koordish. In the meantime a complete change of sentiment has been wrought in the minds of all the people as to the use of the Scriptures. So far from believing it to be a sin to take the book into their hands, they now believe it to be their duty to have it, to study it, and to make it the guide of their lives. Despite all political changes, despite all opposition, here is this book, in all these different languages, and here is the change of sentiment, and great must be the result, both temporal and spiritual, in future ages as well as in the present time.”

The contrast appears also in a statement from another honored missionary in the same part of the world. Dr. Barton writes: “After my experience in the mission field I feel more strongly than ever before the importance of Bible distribution. I have seen in my own experience

so many cases where the word of God has been the nucleus around which has gathered a congregation, and which has resulted in a Christian Sunday school, a day school, and a church, that I have the greatest faith in the word itself."

In our own land we have escaped manifold disasters because the Bible has always been an open book. Half a century ago the voice of a prophet proclaimed in our metropolis that "barbarism was the first danger of the republic." If the peril has been averted, it has been through the Bible, and through those who have used the Bible both for defense and for attack. Some forty-five years ago, a colporteur of this Society, having made his way to a wild, mountainous district in one of the central States, found a community remarkable for ignorance and irreligion. The patriarch was a man ninety years old, who had settled there thirty years before, and had eighteen children, most of whom had grown up and had large families, but were unable to read a word. One son, sixty-two years of age, had nine children, none of whom could

read, and all but two were married. A grandson had eight children, all growing up in the same manner. This colporteur supplied every family with the Bible, told them as best he could the good news of salvation, taught them to pray, and passed on. No long time elapsed before a report came that there had been some marvelous conversions in that neighborhood, and when the Society's Agent visited the place two years later, he found that about a hundred persons had been converted, thirty of whom were lineal descendants of one man. The character of the whole community had been changed. The people were still illiterate, but their profanity and ribaldry had given place to the language of prayer and song. Many of them could not read, but they had heard the truth and obeyed it. Said one of them, "I love to have it in the house, whether we can read or not. *That's the little book we're trying to go by now.*" And another said, "Every time they read out of that little book it makes me cry, and I can't help it." Who can tell, who can imagine, what that community

would have been had it gone on for fifty years longer without the Holy Bible?

This is but a single case, but it describes in brief the work of the Bible Society and its results : its work, to encourage the wider distribution of the Holy Scriptures without note or comment in our country and in other lands ; and its results : men and women converted ; families rescued from degradation ; children nurtured in an atmosphere of purity and brotherly love ; neighborhoods freed from pollution and vice ; communities exempted from the cost of providing for criminals and paupers ; and the nation made more prosperous and happy.

God bless the people of the United States, and God bless the American Bible Society !

